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CRITICISM—GETTING IT OVER

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Criticism is a waste of time unless it functions—not merely in enabling the teacher to fill a period and draw his salary, but in the work of the pupil criticized. If it does not so function, the pupil might better be playing baseball, fishing, roaming the fields, or carrying on an activity from which he may derive some benefit.

Too frequently criticism is ineffective. Pupils do not listen to it or read it; or if they do, they soon forget. It rolls off like water from a roof.

The first problem then is, What makes pupils inattentive or forgetful? The writer believes the answers to this question lie, partially at least, in the following reasons: (1) The mind of the pupil is sometimes on other things. There is a lack of serious purpose and the desire to improve. (2) There is sometimes too much criticism and advice on the part of the teacher. (3) Sometimes criticism is not fresh in the mind of the pupil at the time it is needed. It is there immediately after the effort just criticized, but it should be there at the time of making the next effort.

The second problem then is, How may the causes of inattention or forgetfulness be removed? Let us take them up in order.

1. Our task is to arouse the interest of the pupil and to develop in him seriousness of purpose and the desire for improvement. Many studies of this problem have been made and much excellent work has been done in progressive schools in recent years, therefore it will not be necessary to discuss it fully here. If the pupil's mind runs on other things, let us find out first what those other things are, for some of them may be legitimate interests that may serve to motivate his work. The boy who goes camping, loves animals, takes pictures, or engages in the delightful activities of the Boy Scouts may wish to exchange his experiences with others through speech and writing, and may be led to appreciate the

importance of proper forms in making his ideas clear and interesting. Pupils should be given a wide range of subjects to choose from or allowed to suggest their own subjects; and the teacher need not guess at their real interests. At the very beginning of the term he may ask them to note what they talked about or did yesterday, the past month, or during the summer vacation; and the list of composition subjects may be drawn from these suggestions. Pupils should be given the opportunity for interest.

Another motive is the use by pupils themselves of a composition scale by which they may compare their individual achievements with the standard for their grade. This scale may be one that is on the market or one specially constructed from the student's own compositions. It is not very difficult to make a special scale. A number of competent judges should mark several of the pupils' papers by one of the published scales, the medians of their judgments should be taken as the true mark for each paper, and those specimens should be chosen which will form a scale of approximately equal steps from the lowest to the highest degree of merit. In the use of any scale, the pupil's attention should be called to the particular merits and faults which fix his composition at a certain degree of merit. Graphs showing the progress of individuals and the class should be kept on the walls of the schoolroom.

One thing that prevents or kills enthusiasm is undue severity in criticism. The pupil's attention should be fixed not mainly on the poor quality of his work, but on the way to improve it. Criticism should always be constructive. Destructive criticism seems to the pupil mere fault-finding and leaves him in a hopeless frame of mind, but constructive criticism leaves him hopeful and confident. The teacher should also guard against expecting too much improvement at once but should praise the pupil's efforts and gradual improvement and let him feel the joy of accomplishment. If one has a ten-foot ditch to jump he knows the task is hopeless and does not try; if one has a two-foot ditch, he knows that he can do it and goes about the business.

2. The average individual cannot remember all the advice he gets. Can the teacher himself hear a lecture or sermon and keep all the ideas in mind through the ten months of the school year?

Why expect pupils to do that which we cannot do ourselves? The advice we remember is that which we get a little at a time and *use*. The teacher should criticize a few things at a time and make sure that the criticism is understood and the corrections made. It is not how many times you bang with a hammer, but the direction of the blow that drives the nail home. Criticism should not be talk for talk's sake; but that is just what it is when there is too much of it at once. Ideas come from the teacher's mouth and wander off in the air or out the window. It is not how much you say, but what finds a home in the pupil's mind that counts. It is a mistake to mark all the errors in a composition, unless it is one of such excellence that the errors are few. The worse the composition the more it is plastered with red ink and those pupils who need the most *encouragement* receive the most *discouragement*. The teacher should not be afraid to leave some mistakes unmarked on the ground that wrong habits will thus be strengthened. Marking all mistakes does not mean removing all mistakes. It may mean removing none. And accomplishing something is better than accomplishing nothing. The rule to follow is to mark a few mistakes at a time and follow them up to make sure they are corrected.

3. Criticism should be fresh in the mind of the pupil when he most needs it; that is, at the time he makes the next effort. All compositions should be kept in a loose-leaf notebook in the order in which they are written. The teacher should summarize at the end of the first composition a few faults and he should insist that pupils refer to them just before making the next effort and that there be no repetition of the same mistakes. This should be continued through all the compositions written during the term or year and the teacher should not simply mark the main faults in each composition, but continually refer to the lists of previous mistakes to keep a check upon repetitions. If the teacher corrects a few mistakes at a time and insists upon no repetitions, a great many will be corrected during a year or a school course. Errors which are common to all or many pupils should be corrected on the blackboard before the entire class and all should be required to note them and refer to them just before writing again.

If compositions are written in the classroom, as they frequently should be, the teacher can supervise the process and make sure that instructions are followed.

In oral composition or public speaking, criticisms may be made before the class if this is done with a tactful manner and a kindly spirit. All pupils should be required to write the criticisms down in a special place in their notebooks, to refer to them continually in the preparation of material and to use them in its presentation, so that they function in a steady improvement of work. Sometimes pupils may be required to write their own criticisms of the speeches of their classmates, and the teacher may collect them and comment on them before the class. If this is done without mentioning the name of the student-critic, it will overcome the reluctance of pupils to criticize each other.

In both written and oral composition, the teacher should keep a statistical record of mistakes and warn classes beforehand against those which prove most common. He should emphasize and explain the most important qualities of composition, such as selection of material, unity, coherence, clearness, and interest, before pupils start their first piece of work for him; and he should remember that such instruction will function best if pupils take notes and refer to them just before and while doing the work. The writer has seen excellent results secured from instructing pupils in how to find, select, organize, and present material at the beginning of a term and reiterating these principles in the criticism throughout the term.

The principles here stated have been applied to written and oral composition, but the writer believes that teachers in other fields will find that they function there as well.

If the desire for improvement is aroused through proper motivation, if corrections are given few at a time and followed up, and if the way to improve is fresh in the mind of the pupil at the time it is needed, then teachers will not merely be giving criticism, but also getting it over.